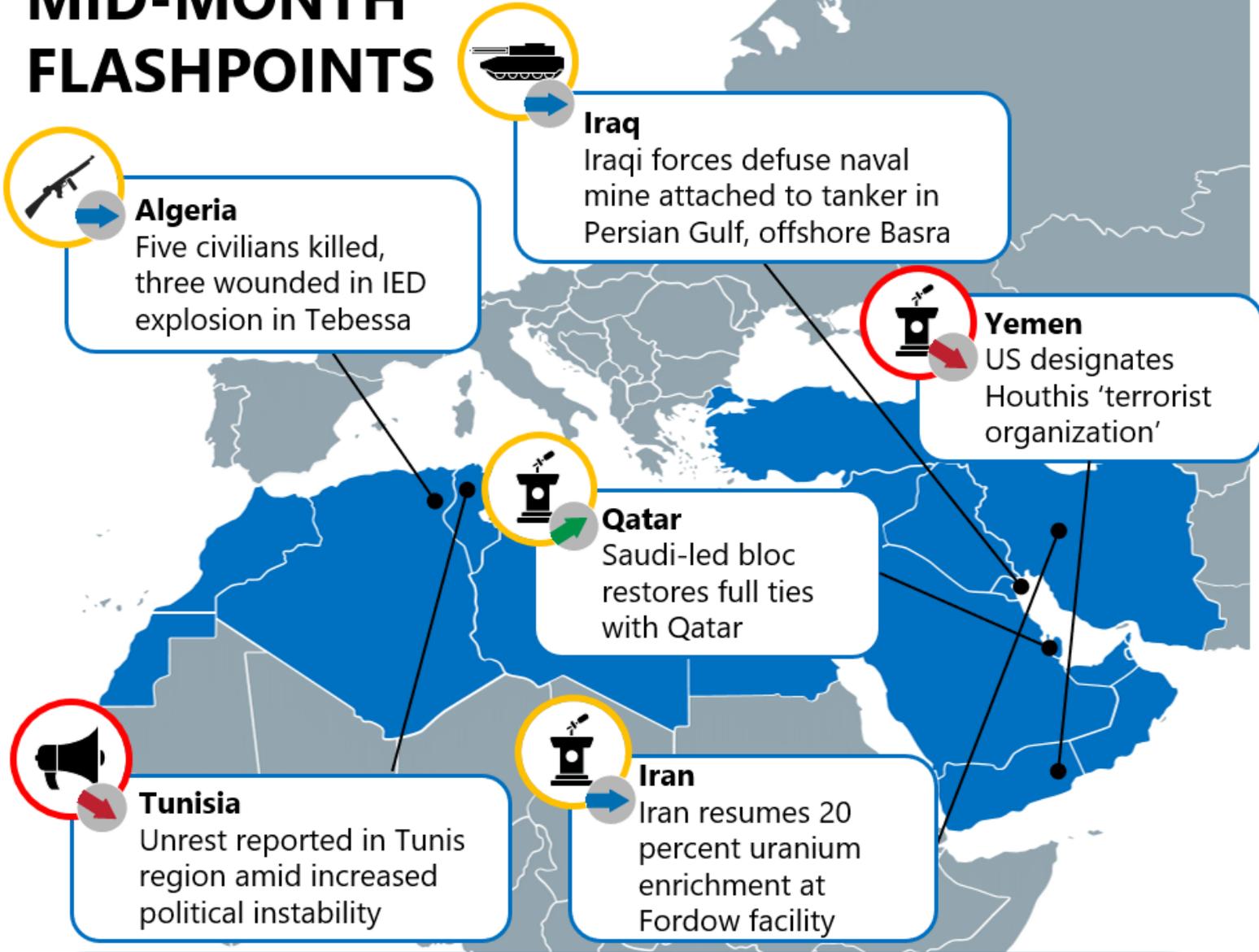




# MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA: MID-MONTH FLASHPOINTS



Icons		Risk Levels	Stability Forecast
Politics	Cyber	Low Risk	Improving
Militancy	Armed Conflict	Medium Risk	Stable
Crime	Civil Unrest	High Risk	Deteriorating
		Extreme Risk	



## **REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS:**

### **Algeria: Five civilians killed, three others wounded in IED explosion in Tebessa Province on January 14; highly notable given rarity**

- According to the Algeria Ministry of National Defense (MDN), the incident took place while the civilian vehicle was passing Oued Khenig-Roum near Tlidjene.
- Tebessa is located almost 500 km southeast of Algiers.

#### **MAX ANALYSIS**

Landmine or IED attacks in Algeria have been rare over recent years, with the last such event reported during a counter-militancy operation in Medea Province in June 2020. The last attack in Tebessa Province took place in February 2018, when an IED targeted a People's National Army (ANP) vehicle in Bir El Ater. Civilian casualties during such attacks are even rarer, which underscores the notability of the recent incident. However, the landmine was likely placed to target ANP patrols. Security operations are recorded relatively frequently in the province, with 18 reported by the MDN in 2020. It is therefore less likely that the explosion was meant to cause civilian casualties. This is also because militant groups operating in Algeria rely heavily on locals for logistical support and recruits and therefore are known to refrain from directly targeting them. Nevertheless, this event underscores the remaining entrenchment and operational capabilities of militants in Algeria, particularly along the Tunisian border, as well as the threat of civilian collateral damage emanating from their activity. The ANP will likely intensify the scope of counter-militancy operations in Tebessa Province over the coming weeks in order to detect and seize similar landmines as well as identifying and detaining militants and their supporters in the region.

### **Iran: Iran resumes 20 percent uranium enrichment at Fordow nuclear facility on January 4; effort to strengthen position ahead of anticipated negotiations with US, tensions to remain high**

- Iranian government spokesperson, Alie Rabie, announced the enrichment process at Fordow, an underground facility near Qom, and that Iran had notified the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).
- Iran's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, announced that the "measures are fully reversible upon full compliance by all".
- Meanwhile, also on January 4, a South Korean-flagged vessel was detained by Iran in the Persian Gulf.

#### **MAX ANALYSIS**

The enrichment of uranium to 20 percent occurred against the backdrop of longstanding tensions regarding Iran's nuclear program. Tensions between Iran, the US, and Israel have been further elevated of late amid the first anniversary of the US's killing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-Quds Force (QF) commander, Qassem Soleimani on January 3, and the killing of Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, Iran's chief nuclear scientist, in November 2020 in Tehran. Iran attributed Israel with responsibility for this incident, which prompted legislation in the Iranian parliament that mandated an increased enrichment of uranium of up to 20 percent. The escalation in uranium enrichment is thus likely a symbolic retaliation to these killings and part of an effort to pressure the US to remove the current sanctions on Iran. That said, the 20 percent enrichment stage is also notable as it constitutes a relatively short technical step towards the 90 percent needed to construct a nuclear weapon. Moreover, under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which restricted the size and purity of Iran's enriched uranium stockpile, Tehran is prohibited from enriching uranium beyond 3.67 percent and forbidden from enriching uranium at the Fordow site at all. The move is thus likely an effort to strengthen Iran's position prior to anticipated negotiations with the US over a renewal of the JCPOA or a similar nuclear agreement, given the incoming administration's stated willingness to engage with Iran. In the same context, Iran's targeting of the South Korean-flagged vessel, which occurred amid relatively frequent detentions of foreign naval vessels in and around its maritime territory over the past years, is a show of force by Tehran and an effort to show the impact on the regional security environment amid the continuation of the US's "maximum pressure" campaign. Tensions will remain high over the coming weeks, despite the change in US administration.



**Iraq: Iraqi security forces defuse naval mine attached to oil tanker in Persian Gulf, offshore Basra Province on January 1; notable given rarity of maritime security incidents in area, reiterates risk to commercial shipping**

- Iraq's Security Media Cell stated that the naval mine was attached to a vessel in the Persian Gulf, offshore Basra Province. The vessel was reportedly a Liberian-flagged oil tanker chartered by an Iraqi state-owned oil company.
- The vessel was refueling another ship when the crew discovered the mine and was subsequently anchored in the Persian Gulf's international waters about 28 nautical miles from Basra's al-Faw Grand Port.

**MAX ANALYSIS**

The incident occurred amid a growing number of security events involving naval mines in the Red Sea, near Saudi and Yemeni territorial waters. The impact of this trend was underscored by a January 14 report indicating that insurance companies are set to increase the cost of providing cover for commercial ships passing through this maritime region. However, such incidents have rarely been reported in recent years near Iraqi territorial waters of the Persian Gulf. As the ship was servicing commercial vessels near Basra's Al-Faw Grand Port, which serves as a major terminal for crude oil shipping, the perpetrators likely sought to cause reputational harm and financially damage the Iraqi state, particularly the oil sector. This is because oil exports contribute by far the largest component of the state budget and an essential form of revenue, especially given that a large part of the Iraqi workforce is employed by the public sector. By attaching a naval mine to a fuel tanker, the assailants likely aimed to portray commercial trade via Iraqi ports as unsafe and thus discourage global shipping companies from approaching Iraqi ports and waterways. Additionally, as the vessel was Liberian-flagged, the incident also indicates that the perpetrators, who remain unknown, aim to dissuade international shipping companies from chartering vessels to Iraqi state-operated organizations. The Iraqi navy will likely increase patrol activities near Iraqi territorial waters to mitigate the risk of further attacks. That said, similar security incidents in these waterways are possible over the coming months.

**Tunisia: Unrest recorded in Tunis, Sousse, Manouba regions on January 16; comes amid elevated socioeconomic grievances, increasing political instability**

- In Manouba Governorate's Tebourba, located approximately 30 km west of central Tunis, protesters burned tires and threw rocks at security personnel. Security forces arrested at least 16 demonstrators. Unrest was also recorded in Manouba's Oued Ellil and Tunis' Douar Hicher, on the northwestern outskirts of Tunis.
- Youth also set fire to tires, blocked roads, and vandalized shops in Sousse.
- Meanwhile, Prime Minister Hichem Mechici replaced 12 ministers in a cabinet reshuffle on January 16.

**MAX ANALYSIS**

The unrest comes against the backdrop of increased socioeconomic grievances throughout Tunisia amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These grievances have triggered an increase in unrest in the country over recent months, especially in outlying governorates. The recent incidents are thus further notable given their location, namely, in relatively close proximity to central Tunis. They highlight that socioeconomic grievances are also prevalent in the areas surrounding the capital. The recent increase in unrest was likely partially triggered by the tenth anniversary of what most Tunisians referred to as their "revolution", which was marked on January 14. The incidents thus highlight the protesters' conviction that the "revolution" has not met their expectations and goals. Further unrest, including within Tunis, is likely to be recorded over the coming weeks. The increase in unrest also comes amid increased political instability and partisanship in Tunisia. This can be seen in the fact that the recent reshuffle comes less than five months after the Tunisian Parliament approved the Mechichi-led government, on September 1, 2020. As the measure reportedly requires the approval of the Tunisian Parliament, the extensive reshuffle is likely to trigger some backlash among coalition members over the coming weeks. This was highlighted by the al-Karama Coalition's statement that it will vote against the new line-up and may withdraw from Mechichi's coalition. Political instability will likely persist in Tunisia over the coming weeks, which, in turn, will hinder the government's ability to implement socio-economic policies in order to appease the protesters.



**Qatar: Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt agree to restore full ties with Qatar on January 5; marks end to years-long blockade of Doha**

- Qatar will be able to reuse Saudi Arabia's airspace and land and sea borders as well as the airspaces of the other parties, which had been prohibited for use by Qatar since 2017.
- The US administration was reportedly a major broker in the agreement.

**MAX ANALYSIS**

This development is highly notable as it brings an end to the diplomatic rift between Qatar and the Saudi-led bloc over accusations that Doha has extended its support to the Muslim Brotherhood and "terrorist" elements in the Middle East as well as maintaining close ties with Iran. Given that Qatari officials have reiterated that Doha will maintain its geopolitical alliances, including with adversaries of the Saudi bloc, Turkey and Iran, the development constitutes a major achievement for the Gulf country. It highlights its success in circumventing the challenges of exclusion by prominent regional actors over the recent years and resisted pressure to change its policies. It also constitutes a success for the outgoing US administration, which the incoming government can leverage to build strong pro-US alliances in the region. Since the announcement, Egypt and Bahrain, prominent members of the Saudi-led bloc, both announced the reopening of their airspace to Qatari flights on January 11-12, which followed the Saudi and Emirati authorities' decision to reopen land, sea, and air borders on January 9. This highlights that the development will contribute to the reestablishment of bilateral trade with further measures aimed at fostering economic cooperation between Qatar and the Saudi-led bloc likely over the coming months. That said, the pursuit of diverging regional interests by these countries will likely prolong distrust and may delay the strengthening of ties.

**Yemen: US Secretary of State announces intention to designate Houthis as FTO on January 11; liable to hinder humanitarian activities, UN-led talks**

- US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that he will notify Congress of his intent to designate the Houthis a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" (FTO) and three Houthi leaders as "Specially Designated Global Terrorists" (SDGT).
- The designations aim to hold the Houthis "accountable for their terrorist acts, including cross-border attacks threatening civilian populations, infrastructure and commercial shipping".
- One of the Houthi leaders, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, issued a statement declaring that the group "reserves the right to respond to any classification" from the US President Donald Trump.

**MAX ANALYSIS**

Pompeo's designation of the Houthis as an FTO is partially an effort by the incumbent administration to broaden the scope of its "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran to include its Yemen-based ally. This is because Iran is the Houthis' primary military and political backer. By designating the Houthis an FTO, the administration likely seeks to legally entrench the US's support to the Saudi-led Coalition, especially amid the forthcoming change in administration. This is given that President-elect Joe Biden is expected to maintain a less cooperative stance towards the Saudi-led Coalition due to its alleged excessive use of force in Yemen. Furthermore, the designation of the Houthis as a "terrorist organization" will likely hinder the transfer of humanitarian goods and medical supplies to civilians in Houthi-held areas as it will pose challenges to organizations seeking to cooperate with the group, which has raised significant concerns across the international community. Similarly, it will also likely hinder UN-led peace talks in the country between the Houthis and other Yemen-based actors due to the complications involved with diplomatic engagement with a "terrorist organization". However, going forward, the incoming administration may seek to use the designation as leverage against the Houthis in a bid to coerce the group into providing concessions and reaching a deal with the Saudi-led Coalition to end the war in Yemen.

**DISCLAIMER:** Please note that any views and/or opinions and/or assessment and/or recommendations presented in this text are solely those of Max Security. If you are not the named addressee you should not disseminate, distribute or copy this text. If you are not the intended recipient you are notified that disclosing, copying, distributing or taking any action in reliance on the contents of this information is strictly prohibited. Max Security Solutions accepts no liability for (i) the contents of this text/report being correct, complete or up to date; (ii) consequences of any actions taken or not taken as a result and/or on the basis of such contents. Copyright – 2021 Max Security